

tion, McHugh advanced and placed his hand on Quaille's shoulder.

"My boy, when I asked you to hide yourself in the theater to-night, I believed that the only one of us in real danger was the man that plays Woodford's part. Maybe that's so still. But you've had this warning. Call it off; I'll try to make other arrangements."

His attitude was sacrificial. Quaille smiled.

"I'll see it through," he said. "I'm not so easily frightened as Carlton. I'll take care of anything physical. I'll have a revolver."

He released his shoulder.

"So that's settled," he said. "There's one thing more before I go. I've been thinking over what you said last night—about our leading lady. I mean your idea that she might have something to do with the mystery. You know, I'd rather believe in spirits. It would be easier."

McHugh's gravity gathered in a frown. He gnawed at his cigar.

"Seems to me when I told you to get friendly with the girl I might have spared my breath."

Quaille reddened.

"What is it, McHugh? If we're going to work together on this thing, we must be frank. We must share our ideas."

McHugh's frown died. He spoke gently, with an exceptional feeling.

"You trust me, Quaille. You're young and impressionable. You do as I tell you, and let me work my own way. I honestly believe it's the only safe course. There's nothing I can tell you; I'm pretty well in the dark. Maybe I ought to have kept my mouth shut."

His expression hardened.

"Just the same, don't you let anybody pull the wool over your eyes."

Before Quaille could speak, he had stepped back and raised the telephone.

"I'll get after that call of yours," he said glibly. "I expect to have news for you at rehearsal this afternoon."

SO Quaille went, fighting back his temper with the argument that it was only McHugh's desperate desire to find a rational explanation that had led him to turn in such an unlikely and unjust direction as Barbara.

He got Wilkins for luncheon: he would spend as much time as possible with Carlton's successor. And he soon found it would not be an uncongenial precaution; for Wilkins was good company.

During the meal he displayed none of those symptoms that had preceded his request yesterday to omit the scene in which Carlton had dropped precisely in the manner of Woodford's death. In fact, he didn't once revert to the theater or the revival of "Coward's Fare" until they were walking down for the rehearsal.

"Melancholy old hole, Woodford's!" Wilkins said. And a little later:

"Carlton wasn't a man to go out like that. Funny! Darned good actor, too!"

Quaille could guess that the warning, so far, had been withheld from Wilkins.

Then they were in the alley, and a moment later had invaded the somber gloom of Woodford's. Quaille pushed open one of the set doors. McHugh had not yet arrived—a decided variation from his habit. The others sat around silently, their glances directed toward the shadow-thronged auditorium. Involuntarily Quaille's eyes turned to the same point.

The shrouded, empty rows of seats jeered at him. Try as he might, he couldn't picture them filled with living men and women, voluble, expectant.

Dolly moved uneasily about at the back of the stage. The old actress called to him:

"No word from the king?"

Quaille strolled up.

"I dare say he'll be here presently."

He lowered his voice.

"You're nervous. You feel the—the cat?"

She spread her hands impatiently.

"Always. Always—and close to-day."

Her certainty chilled him. He shrugged his shoulders and turned to Barbara, who sat alone on the sofa. As he approached

he studied her intently. It was the first time he had seen the girl since McHugh had advised him she was worth watching. Surely there was no evil in the quiet figure—only a slight melancholy.

"You look worried, Mr. Quaille."

"Only sleepy," he smiled.

Dolly had followed him.

"I'm jealous," she said, with a false good humor. "In the old days the authors always made up to me."

Dolly's glance still roved about the stage. Her manner spurred Quaille's discomfort. McHugh's brisk entrance lifted a responsibility from his shoulders.

McHugh clapped his hands. His voice was thin with sarcasm.

"I'm sorry I'm so late. I was detained by a sick friend—or wife—or sister: take your choice. You see how hollow you sound when you try to hand me that sort of dope. Come on, now; let's get busy. We'll rehearse the first two acts this afternoon. Third act to-night."

He raised his voice.

"Tommy! Tommy Ball!"

The dapper assistant stage-manager appeared from the wings.

"Put a call for eight o'clock up. Every night now. Make it big, so they won't say they were near-sighted and couldn't see it or deaf and couldn't hear me. Dolly! Barbara! Helen Hendon! Come here."

When the three women had obeyed, he faced them accusingly.

"Clothes all right?"

They nodded. He simulated a vast stupefaction.

"My God! You're not women. You're sorcerers! Then bring 'em down to-night. I'll have photographers. I want to get flashes of half a dozen poses for the Sunday papers, and something big for a poster—maybe that third-act scene. Understand, you men? No dress rehearsal, but you'll have to get in costume long enough to give me my pictures. Now, then. First act. Come on, Quaille. Over the footlights. Or let's walk through like Johnnies."

With a sly motion he indicated the long, narrow passage that ran behind the boxes. The ruse informed Quaille that the manager wished to speak to him privately. He had an instant's hope that, after all, McHugh had learned something.

"Well?" he asked eagerly, when the door was closed behind them.

McHugh frowned.

"You were right, Quaille. Your warning's got me guessing. Whole telephone company's been working on it. Not a trace. They say the call couldn't have been made."

Quaille braced himself against the wall.

"I had a sneaking hope, McHugh."

"How do you feel about your night's job now?" the manager asked.

Quaille fought a stifling sensation in the narrow passage, which was nearly dark.

"I told you I would see it through," he said.

McHugh's face confessed doubt.

"It's up to you," he said. "Entirely up to you."

"Don't worry," Quaille said. "I'll try to take care of myself."

McHUGH caught him after rehearsal and drove him to an electrical appliance store. He bought a flashlight, in which he had a new battery inserted, and handed it to Quaille.

"Take that with you to-night," he said, "and don't forget your revolver. All the doors, except the stage entrance, will be locked, and the keys will be in safe keeping."

Quaille walked on to his apartment. He approached the door unwillingly. Suppose that remote and unaccountable ringing should fill his ears again? But silence greeted him from the dark rooms. Undisturbed, he entered and changed his clothing. Before leaving he took a revolver from his bureau drawer and examined each deadly cartridge and tested the trigger mechanism. Everything worked precisely. He put the gun in his hip pocket and went out.

He dined at one of Broadway's flashiest restaurants, thinking that the music, the motion, the blatant laughter, would fill

him with material and cynical thoughts. But instead of the swaying figures of the dancers he saw Carlton topple and crash to the stage, and above the music he could hear Dolly crying again and again her assurance of a cat.

When he reached the blind façade of Woodford's, he realized that the neighborhood at this hour lacked its afternoon's vivacity. Two photographers lounged with Mike in the stage door.

Quaille stepped through, nodding pleasantly at the old property-man. He observed streaks of light escaping from the antiquated doors of the first-floor dressing-rooms. Soon the company began to appear in costumes of the period immediately following the Civil War.

McHugh's nervous humor, when he arrived, was more pronounced. He summoned the photographers.

After a number of the groups had been taken, he called Dolly, Barbara, and Wilkins down stage again. His manner was hesitating.

"I've got to have the third-act big scene for a poster."

He cleared his throat.

"No lines, you understand. Just the posing. And you'll have to center it some. Everybody else off the stage—out of sight."

Quaille, alert as he was, read no change in Wilkins' face. He fancied, though, that the man's shoulders squared a trifle. On his part, he had no fear of this quick posing for a picture. It had little in common with the rehearsal of the complete scene; nor was it reasonable to expect it to approach a similar tragic dénouement. Yet that moment during which Wilkins held the candlestick aloft was eventually to impress him with as thorough bewilderment as Carlton's death. For the present, however, nothing extraordinary passed. The powder flashed for the last time; the photographers collected their paraphernalia and disappeared. McHugh started the rehearsal.

This was Quaille's opportunity to follow the manager's directions. He felt his way through the darkness of the staircase to the dress-circle and balcony. He paused in the box where he had left his overcoat and took the flashlight from the pocket. Armed with this, he invaded the cellar, and later climbed the circular staircase to the dressing-rooms and fly galleries.

HE was relieved when he had finished his inspection. As he descended, convinced that the theater secreted no alien presence, he caught some of the dialogue from the stage. McHugh had gone back to the opening of the act. Therefore, when he looked over the railing he was not unprepared to see Barbara in the wings awaiting the cue for her entrance. She still wore her costume of the period of Woodford's beginnings.

At his step she moved back with a little cry, quickly smothered.

He smiled.

"I'm sorry I frightened you."

They spoke in low tones to avoid disturbing the players on the stage. The tenseness left her pose. She put out her hand toward him gropingly. Her voice was not quite firm.

"Why were you prowling up there?"

"Just nosing around."

She was oddly persistent.

"I don't believe you'd do that here without a purpose. Why were you there? You're not—you're not preparing to take chances with Woodford's?"

Her anxiety warmed him, but it brought also a less pleasant stimulation. It swung his mind back to McHugh's distrust of her. As a matter of fact, her manner was strange. There had been about it something unusual ever since the moment of Carlton's death.

She came closer.

"I don't know what you're planning," she said rapidly; "but you saw Mr. Carlton die, and you've heard Dolly talk about the cat, and you've felt—you must have felt what we all have—"

From the stage he heard Wilkins glibly reciting the cue for her entrance; but it entered his ears unimportantly, and evidently it had not reached hers at all, for

she hurried on, in a voice so low that he had to bend to catch its eager appeal:

"You won't take chances here, Mr. Quaille, with such forces?"

"You don't believe in them really?" he asked, surprised.

"I don't know. Does anybody know? Can anybody say they don't exist?"

She broke off, breathing hard.

"No one can deny such forces with confidence," he agreed. "But we have to live in the world we know. We have to act by common sense."

Again Wilkins' voice came, expectant, querulous. It did not appear to concern him or her. He timidly touched her arm. She shrank away.

"Why are you afraid for me?" he asked gently.

McHugh's impatience forbade an answer. He roared from the front:

"Barbara! Barbara! Where the devil—"

She sighed. The entreaty of her eyes increased. Then she turned and ran on.

Quaille returned to the box, and later to the auditorium.

WHEN McHugh dismissed the company he took out his watch. It was eleven o'clock. It was fully half an hour more before the players had changed their clothing and were ready to leave the theater. Meantime Quaille stood where he could keep an eye on the stage door. McHugh strolled over and for a time lingered with him, but he offered no fresh instructions.

"We've covered everything, as far as I can see. I've nothing to say, except if you want to change your mind it isn't too late."

Quaille shook his head. His brief conversation with Barbara had made him anxious to test his own courage. He experienced a boyish eagerness to prove to her, as well as to himself, that he was not to be startled by shadows.

As he stepped into the alley she came from her dressing-room and passed him. He felt himself flush in response to her glance, questioning, appealing—almost, he would have said, warning.

He watched Mike lock the stage door after the last straggler and pass the key to McHugh. Side by side with the manager, he walked slowly down the alley. When the others had disappeared, McHugh pressed his arm.

"Go back now and see what you'll see. I'm running straight home. If you want me ring me up, no matter how late it may be."

"All right. Good-by," Quaille said, attempting an indifferent tone.

He saw the manager turn into the street. Alone he retraced his steps through the somber alley and faced the stage door. He took the great key from his pocket and noiselessly inserted it in the lock. Although he was as sure as a man could be that the building was empty, he had determined to proceed as if it might house a multitude of conspirators. So he turned the key quietly; and gently, to prevent the hinges creaking, he drew the iron door back.

The way to the cavern lay open before him.

Its unrelieved blackness, its musty air, in which the perfume seemed stronger than ever, revolted him. He stepped through, closed the door, and locked himself in, returning the key to his pocket. Now, surely, no intruder could enter. He had every assurance that he was cut off from human companionship. That very fact, taken with the appalling night, made it difficult for him to deny the possibility of another sort of fellowship here.

The memory of what he had told Barbara was restorative:

"We have to live in the world we know. We have to act by common sense."

That made it easier to approach the stage. His familiarity with the place was useful, but as he passed the switchboard he combated a desire almost uncontrollable to snap back the switches and flood the cavern with light. Why not, if he was so sure the house was empty? Then he remembered McHugh's instructions, and he tried to sneer. He was to give the supernatural every chance.

He decided that the center of the audi-